

Angela's Ashes – A Memoir: Images of a Particular View of Limerick, Ireland

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Abstract: *This paper deals with some still images from the film Angela's ashes: A memoir, directed by Alan Parker and based on the Pulitzer-Prize-winning memoir with the same title, by Frank McCourt. The analysis of the images shows that Parker sometimes transfers and at other times adapts (according to Brian MacFarlane's theory of film adaptation) the material of the memoir or the narrator's experience as a boy, and his specific view of Limerick, Ireland, at a particular time in history.*

Nature is not only all that is visible to the eye – it also includes the inner pictures of the soul.

Edvard Munch

The expression “a particular view” in the title of this paper and the quotation which follows were included to bring to the reader's attention the intricate meanderings of imagination in the creation of a fictional universe or the intricate paths towards recollections long kept within one's memory. Limerick, the city where Frank McCourt lived for more than ten years while he was growing up, from the late 30s to the 50s, is depicted by him, in his memoir *Angela's ashes* (1996), as a place of suffering and death. Most readers know, however, that reality can be distorted and that harsh times can become worse, depending on the gaze of the observer, especially if he is a child. This is not to say, however, that Limerick, at the time when Frank lived there as a child, was not an inhospitable place. This reminds us that reality is always filtered by the observer's, in this case a child's, perception of it.

While searching for information on Ireland and Limerick in the years of the memoir, some historical and economic information proved to be helpful for understanding the hard times Frank knew in the land of his parents. The Great Depression, which began in the United States in 1929, “quickly turned into a worldwide economic slump owing to the special and intimate relationships that had been forged between the United States and European economies after World War I.”¹ Ireland had already lived through

a civil war which ended in May 1923, with approximately 5000 military deaths and an unknown number of civilian casualties. The “disillusioned decades” which followed the civil war and the Great Depression were evoked in McCourt’s memoir as they were apprehended by the boy he then was and, at the time of writing the memoir, by the older man who recovers the inner pictures of his soul. Limerick, from Old Irish, translates ironically as “vulnerable land” – ironically because its inhabitants, in this case the McCourts, became quite vulnerable in this vulnerable city. The River Shannon, one of the main characters in the memoir, considered by Frank’s father as a murderer, has shaped the destiny of the city since the Middle Ages, when it was the main route of access to the center of Ireland. Depression was to last nearly two centuries, through famine, war, and emergency, until the boom times of the 1990s. Limerick, like Ireland as a whole, prospered as never before in the last decade of the 20th century – a trend that has continued into the 21st century. “The city now boasts a rich and growing multicultural population” due to government measures, but “the first stirrings of prosperity, in Limerick and in the country as a whole, followed the anti-protectionist economic reforms of the late 1950s.”²

On October 10, 2005, *Jornal Nacional*, a Brazilian TV news program, presented a report about the changes that have occurred in Ireland since the 1990s. According to this report, 60% of the young population now attend university, the country has one of the most stable economies in the world, and its *per capita* income surpasses England’s. The descendents of Irish people who left the country long ago in search of prosperity are now returning because of the better living conditions and the possibility of studying and researching in the country of their ancestors. *Jornal Nacional* showed several statues of inhabitants of the city which tell of the devastating poverty that prevailed in the country during the first half of the 20th century. They are images that reveal misery, abandonment, and death. It is this particular view of Limerick from the late 30s to the 50s of the last century that is retrieved in the memoir and subsequently recreated in the film *Angela’s ashes* (1999).

Angela’s Ashes: A memoir, McCourt’s first published work, revisits the miserable childhood that he, his brothers and their parents experienced in Ireland, by recovering his past of suffering and hunger in Limerick. The writer does this, however, without any trace of bitterness or resentment, even though at the beginning of the narrative he seems at times to lack smooth articulation, which functions as a metaphor for Frank himself, who sees, learns, but does not understand; who listens, registers, but remains quiet; who suffers aggressions, without knowing why; and who confronts hunger and misery, without rebelling against them. As the account continues, the narrative flows more smoothly, for the protagonist is growing up and begins to have a better understanding of his situation. At the end, the memoir registers the victory of dream over reality – in other words, Frank’s dream of returning to the USA. The reader’s reaction is one of relief, as the young man, still less than twenty years old, then frees himself from the misery he had to endure for more than ten years. The film shows, through very strong images, a state of

misery as devastating as in the memoir, a misery reconstructed by Alan Parker, a well-known British movie director.

In “The Making of”, on the DVD of the movie, Parker talks about his impulse to create a monochromatic film, prompted by the very theme of the memoir – the misery of an unemployed family in Ireland between the years of 1935 and 1950. Although Parker does not produce a B&W film, he gives us the impression that he did. From the first shots of *Limerick*, the use of warm colors is restricted, and many of the shots are bathed with a blue luminosity, enhancing the effect of coldness, abandonment, and death, in what appears to be a monochromatic background.

The misery in the memoir, and consequently in the film *Angela's ashes*, is neither associated with the war nor the result of ethnic conflicts; it does not refer to the Holocaust, even though it takes place during the years of World War II. It does not include weapons, yet death surrounds the lives of the people – death from sicknesses caused by undernourishment, dampness, lack of sanitation, and the cold weather. *Angela's Ashes* records the return of the McCourt family to Ireland from the USA after the death of a baby girl. The misery in this memoir is McCourt's lonely suffering as a boy who does not understand the verbal and physical aggression of adults (including family members, State representatives, and members of the Roman Catholic Church); who does not accept the father who spends his welfare money or sporadic wages on drinking, with no heed whatsoever for the needs of his desperate hungry family; who did not know why the family had to return to Ireland where the cold weather, dampness, and lack of sanitation kill its inhabitants, or why his little brothers are put inside little boxes in a hole in the ground and covered by earth.

Hannah Arendt (1970, p.18) commented that “what we are up against is a generation that is by no means sure that it has a future.” That is what the reader realizes in McCourt's narrative; the protagonist does not know if he will have a future. He will arrive at a point of despair in which death seems the only way out, especially when he is attacked by typhoid fever. Thus, the book depicts the misery of daily life and the casual violence of human beings against one another, and this paper deals with it by analyzing some still images of the film, and, when necessary, establishing a dialogue with the memoir. Judith Evans Hanhisalo, commenting on the film on the Internet, said that “There are no explosions, no aliens, no car crashes, *no easy answers in Angela's ashes*” (my emphasis). Sometimes we notice that there is no answer at all in the miserable life depicted in the memoir and in the film.

The still images chosen concern the bad weather in *Limerick*, the close-up shots of Frank McCourt's facial expression (onscreen scenes and their relationship with the offscreen space), and the representation of the system of social assistance in the city. In the still images, the elements of interest are the positioning of the camera, the framing of the scenes, the positioning of the characters in the scenic space, and the different representational planes.

The beginning of the film shows some shots of *Limerick*, without the viewer knowing what place the filmed narrative is referring to. The *voice over*, which starts a

few seconds after, will give us an indication of the country by referring to a childhood spent in Ireland and by the speaker's accent. This voice repeats in its totality the most remarkable statement of the first page. The narrator says:

When I look back on my childhood I wonder how I survived at all. It was, of course, a miserable childhood: the happy childhood is hardly worth your while. Worse than the ordinary miserable childhood is the miserable Irish childhood, and worse yet is the miserable Irish Catholic childhood. (p. 3)

This sentence accompanies the various takes or shots at the beginning of Parker's film. The first one, in a low plane or low-camera, shows a sloping alley, suggesting that the camera-man is in the puddle at the bottom of the slope in the gray alley. The second shot, from a high plane, or high-camera, shows the same alley as seen by someone at the top, from a higher level of the street, looking down at the flooded area at the bottom. After that, there are several shots, with a fixed camera from a normal angle, showing other lanes, the River Shannon, and the image of the Virgin Mary in a niche in the wall of a house, surrounded by lighted candles. All of these shots are on a fixed plane; there is no movement of the camera. The movements are restricted to those caused by the natural elements, and this contrast between the fixed camera and the movements caused by the natural elements becomes quite impressive. As Aumont et al. point out (1992, p. 9): "there are tremendous differences between the individual film frame and the image on the screen – to begin with, only the projected image creates the impression of movement [...]".

The movements of the elements during these first shots are the insistent rainfall, the water running down the lanes, the seagulls flying over the River Shannon, the ruffled surface of the water, and the flickering of the candles. Eliminating these movements, we could say that we have pictures, for the camera remains static in each shot during the first scenes. The immobile camera seems to say: "We are stuck in life!", but the natural elements seem to respond "in trembling and fear." The gray scenery, bathed with a blue luminosity, increases the sense of sadness, cold, dampness, misery, and imminent death. The whole memoir, except for the first chapter, takes place in this town of incessant rain. The film, with the exception of the scene in Brooklyn in 1939, the scene of the ship moving away from the Statue of Liberty, or, at the end, that of the ship approaching the Statue, takes place in Limerick and its bad weather. The scenes of the ships, the first the one taking Frank and his family to Ireland and the second the one bringing him back to the USA, work as a frame in the memoir.

In the first scenes of the film, the bad weather is therefore the protagonist. It will become the villain by contributing to the death of the twins, Oliver and Eugene, who due to cold and hunger, as well as the dampness of the weather, die of tuberculosis. The bad weather then becomes the background against which the story takes place,

returning to the foreground again when the boy Frank writes a composition entitled “Jesus Christ and the weather”, which will be discussed a little further on.

These first scenes of the Irish town, when they reappear as the background during the film, are peopled mainly by Frank and his brother Malachy, running in the rain and kicking at the water when entering the flooded house where they live at the end of the sloping alley, next to the only lavatory in the street. We can interpret the positioning of the camera in the first shots (low camera shooting the upper end of the alley) as someone’s longing – someone who lives in the floods of anguish, destitute even of food to eat – for a place that offers comfort, and who looks towards the upper end of the street in an attitude of hope. On many occasions during the memoir, Frank imagines himself being the son of other women, mothers who feed their children; once he imagines he is the son of another man, a man who works in the lighthouse, protects his children, and provides for his family. His salvation could come from above; however, as we follow the camera, which in the next shot is located at the high end of the alley, the distancing in level and in space does not seem to provide any comfort to the suffering of those who are living at the lower end of the street. The scenes which show the streets at a normal angle seem to say that it is all the same. Nothing changes; nobody seems to care, not even the Virgin Mary, who seems unmoved by all the suffering of the poor people of Limerick, represented by Her passivity amid the uncontrollable flickering of the candles.

To compose the first scenes, Parker uses information which permeates the memoir from page 90 on, when the McCourt family, after the death of three children, “move to Roden Lane [...] our house is at the end of the lane, the last of the six. Next to our door is a small shed, a lavatory [for the whole lane], and next to that a stable”.

It is not in this description of the alley in the memoir, however, that we learn about Limerick’s bad weather being responsible for the death of its inhabitants. Frank’s father repeatedly calls the River Shannon a murderer, for he believes that the dampness of the river contributes to the tuberculosis of its people. The writer, on the other hand, inserts various passages describing the constant rain invading his house, flooding the ground floor, bringing residues from the lavatory, and forcing the family members to abandon the ground floor in the rainy months to use just the top floor as their living space. Possibly the climax concerning the effects of the weather on the people is found in the above-mentioned composition by the young Frank, when he is made to go back to fifth grade because of his weeks of absence in hospital with typhoid fever. Frank describes the scene as a miracle of Saint Francis of Assisi, the saint who he prayed to help him return to the sixth grade class he had belonged to before his stay in hospital. At the end of his composition “Jesus Christ and the weather”, he writes that, if Jesus had been born in Limerick, there would be no Christianity on earth, because He would not have survived the bad weather; but would have died of tuberculosis in childhood.

These various images of Limerick’s bad weather give Parker the necessary material to begin his film with static, unpopulated images of the gray, flooded Roden

Alley and its surrounding streets, pretty much anticipating Frank McCourt's fictional narrative, but also thereby creating the prevalent physical and psychological atmosphere in this narrative. While they are in Limerick, Frank and his brothers spend most of their life in this alley.

The reader of the memoir only comes upon these scenes when the McCourt parents lose their seven-week-old daughter in Brooklyn and go back to Ireland with their four sons, who are still very young children. Frank, the eldest, is about five, Malachy between three and four, and the twins, Eugene and Oliver, almost two. In the film, Frank and Malachy are older.

Soon after the depressing, unpopulated shots of Limerick at the beginning of the film, the director recreates a scene of exuberant joy involving the parents of the McCourt family in Brooklyn in 1939, with the birth of a beautiful girl, called Margaret Mary. The death of this girl, who had changed her father's life, seven weeks after her birth will plunge the mother, Angela, into deep depression and cause the father to start drinking again. The interference of two middle-aged cousins of Angela's mother who, with a total lack of compassion, describe the calamitous situation in a letter to her, results in Angela's mother sending tickets so that her daughter's family can return to Ireland – their home country. The boisterous cousins made up their minds to get rid of the problem called "Family McCourt". However, the McCourts' life in Ireland will be no different, for neither Malachy's nor Angela's family will have them in their houses. In the film, we do not know how Malachy and Angela met, we do not know about them being forced into marriage by Angela's family due to the fact that she was pregnant, nor do we know about the first years of their life as a couple. Although these facts are mentioned in the memoir, Parker's choice not to include this information does not make it any harder for the viewer to understand the difficulties the Irish family experiences in the USA during the last years of the Great Depression. What they cannot imagine is that the suffering in their own country will be a lot more intense and devastating than in the USA. In Brooklyn, although the father is the same irresponsible person, the McCourts have the help of other immigrants who live in the same neighborhood. In Ireland even the family – Malachy's parents and Angela's mother and brothers – deny them shelter and assistance, and Frank, as a child, observes these events with an inquisitive, scrutinizing eye.

The physical and climatic difficulties are paralleled by the difficulties that the protagonist has in relating to the people and the religious entities that surround him. The shots which best show the difficulties the boy protagonist has in learning and understanding the reality around him are registered by the camera in close-ups of Frank's face: the first one after Margaret Mary's death, still in America, in which the close-up of his face reveals an inquisitive look, frightened, looking for answers which the immediate reality refuses to give; the second one after the death of the second twin, Eugene, when the father kneels down with his two oldest sons in front of the image of the Holy Mother and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. It is important to stress that, in these scenes, the viewer's

impression of the scene with the close-up of Frank's face includes the onscreen as well as the offscreen space, for Frank observes whoever and whatever is around him. Actually, in the first scene the viewer becomes the noisy cousins – out of the frame – and in the second there is a shifting of the camera so that it takes the place of the Sacred Heart of Jesus (as well as the viewer's), also out of the frame, in a close-up shot. Aumont et al. (1992, p. 13), talking about onscreen and offscreen space, say:

The film image creates an analogy with real space; the resulting impression is usually powerful enough to make us forget not only the flatness of the image, but also, for example, the absence of color if the film is black and white or the absence of sound in a silent film. In addition, while we may not be led to forget the edges of the image, which are always more or less consciously present in our perception, we may be made to forget the fact that beyond those edges there is no image. Moreover, the onscreen space is habitually perceived as included within a more vast scenographic space. Even though the onscreen is the only visible part, this larger scenographic space is nonetheless considered to exist around it. It is this notion that allows André Bazin's famous formula translating the screen image as a "mask" or a window onto the world, a phrase borrowed from Leon-Battista Alberti, the great Renaissance theoretician. Bazin's point is that if the image works like a window to make a fragment of the (imaginary) world visible, then there is no reason to suspect that this world would stop at the image's edges.

There is much to criticize in this extreme embellishment of the image as window. Nevertheless, this excessive stance (which is always partially valid when we are watching a film) does reveal that an imagined space exists that is invisible yet extends the visible; we call it "offscreen space."

It is with the innocent and scrutinizing eyes of a child, captured in a close-up shot, that Frank observes, and the viewer knows that he observes the invasion by his grandmother's cousins of their Brooklyn apartment – where his mother lies apathetic and completely still in bed, in deep depression, and the four very young boys lie in a deplorable state, with soiled clothes and crying for food – and the way they criticize everything and decide about the destiny of the McCourt family. They do not decide to take them in or to help them, but to find a way of getting rid of them. In this scene, Frank is threatened by corpulent, boisterous, aggressive women, who tell him off severely when he tries to explain, by telling the truth, why the odor in the apartment is so terrible. Michaud (2001, p. 60), writing about the strategy of violence, says that "the development of an atmosphere of a cold war, without real peace nor open war, in which the violence remains on the horizon of relationships, at times explodes, at times threatens, without escaping completely from the control of the adversaries who make their game as rational as possible".

Other more intense and tragic situations will occur, such as Frank's lack of understanding on seeing his brothers inside little wooden boxes being put in a hole in the ground. He fears passing through a similar experience. Then we have the close-up

shots, inside the frame, Frank's face with his hands joined in prayer, and, outside the frame, the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the image of the Virgin Mary, which give the viewer a feeling of shock. Ironically, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, although it is in a place bathed with light, remains enveloped in shadows, as the result of the construction of the scene. In these two close-up shots, Frank's gaze is directed towards people or objects on a higher plane, intensifying the idea that he is just a little child at the mercy of others, older and more powerful than him, hoping for help that will never come. We see and hear in the close-up scene, from a high camera, the pleading of the child in front of the Virgin Mary and the Sacred Heart of Jesus. He is afraid he is going to be placed in a wooden box and buried like his younger brothers. The two scenes find parallels in the memoir on two different occasions: soon after the death of Margaret Mary (p. 42-43), and after that of Eugene (the second twin, p. 84). There are then only the two older boys left, Frank and Malachy. Considering their "fidelity" to the scenes in the memoir, the reader can classify these shots as transferences. According to Brian McFarlane's theory of filmic adaptations in *Novel to Film: An introduction to the theory of adaptation* (1996, p. 23),

This distinction [between transference and adaptation] is central [...] to any systematic study of what happens in the transposing of novel into film.

[...] In broad terms, this involves a distinction between narrative (which can be transferred) and enunciation (which cannot, involving as it does quite separate systems of signification).

Regarding the violence of the religious social system, the framing of the most shocking scene – Angela pregnant with her sixth child, with just her two sons alive and present, in the center of the room, and with no possibility of escape – makes it the one that best illustrates the repression and the lack of respect by the religious social system for people at the mercy of misfortune, in the years covered by the memoir. The representatives of the social services of the St Vincent de Paul Society are in front of them. In the background, bathed in light from a window out of the frame, is an enormous crucifix. The light also touches the McCourts' backs, suggesting to the viewer that they walk in the shadows, that there is no light to illuminate their path. Behind the McCourts, on the right side, a group of women, encouraged by the social assistance representatives, laugh at the inappropriate jokes of the men at the table. Behind them, other women, silhouetted and pressed against the glass windows on the left side, also wait to be helped. To compose this scene, Parker used at least two different moments in the narrative. In the film, when Angela seeks help at the St Vincent de Paul Society, she had already lost three of her children, but the scene includes details from the memoir of more than one visit to the Society: the first is when, on finding out that the Department of Labor would not pay her enough subsistence to survive, Angela leaves the twins in the father's care and goes with the two older boys to ask for help (p. 62); the second one is after the deaths of Oliver and Eugene, when they are moving to Roden Alley and need coupons

to exchange for some used furniture (p. 90-91). This scene is an adaptation or recreation, where at least two scenes from the memoir are reworked and become one. In the film Angela had lost three children and was pregnant with Michael when she visits the Society; in the memoir, on her second visit to the St Vincent de Paul Society, Angela had just had a miscarriage after the death of her twins. Concerning the creation of the *mise-en-scène*, McFarlane (1996, p. 20) says:

[...] the enunciation [...] characterizes the process that creates, releases, shapes [...] the 'utterance'. [...] Film may lack those literary marks of enunciation such as person and tense, but in the ways in which, for example, shots are angled and framed and related to each other (i.e. in matters related to *mise-en-scène* and montage) the enunciatory processes are inscribed. Film enunciation, in relation to the transposition of written works to the screen, is a matter of adaptation proper, not of transfer.

When Parker transfers or adapts scenes from McCourt's memoir to the screen, when he positions his camera, frames of the scenes, positions of the characters in the scenic space, and produces different representational planes, he recreates, in an emphatic and powerful way, the endless human suffering in *Limerick*: the victimization of Frank and his brothers, the lack of respect and even open cruelty on the part of members of the family and the social welfare system of the time. The film, considered as the most popular form of narrative of the 20th century, as popular as the 19th century novel, creates an illusion of reality and of 3D, allowing scenes of suffering to remain strongly present for a long time in the eyes and mind of the audience. With regard to films based on novels, Robert Stam (Naremore, ed., 2000, p. 59) says that "...the cinema has not lesser, but rather greater resources for expression than the novel, and this is independent of what the actual filmmaker has done with these resources". Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, neither ethnic conflicts nor wars are necessary for us to read about or see unbearable conflicts. Everyday events are sufficient to reveal a Machiavellian system in which children, adults, and elderly people suffer without any possibility of consolation or escape.

Notes

- 1 <http://www.english.uiuc.edu/maps/depression/about.htm>
- 2 http://uk.holidaysguide.yahoo.com/p-travelguide-96874-limerick_history-i

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